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SUBJECT: INDIGENOUS ISSUES: STILL LOOKING FOR SOLUTIONS

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11. (SBU) Summary: After thirty years of bipartisan support for a range of policies based on self-determination and self-management, the Australian Government, in reaction to increasing evidence of policy failure, has embarked on policies involving direct intervention in the lives of indigenous citizens. Begun in the final year of the Howard government, the Intervention in remote, disadvantaged aboriginal communities, raised indigenous issues to the forefront of domestic politics. The Rudd government came into power in 2007 vowing to redress relations with Australian indigenous peoples by establishing a 'New Partnership', and "Resetting the Relationship". The language used has been different from that of the previous government and the Rudd government, while retaining most elements of the intervention, has broken with the previous government by making an official public apology to members of the "stolen generation". Rhetoric aside, most observers here say that little has changed since Rudd's apology last year. Indigenous people still lag in all major socio-economic measures including health, employment and education and the debate on how to deal with this social wound continues. END SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

12. (U) The debate over a public official apology to the "stolen generation" had been going on for more than a decade before Rudd's speech. In May, 1997 the report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, entitled "Bringing Them Home", was tabled in Parliament. A key recommendation in the report was that reparation be made to indigenous people affected by past GOA policies of forced removal of Aboriginal children from their parents. That reparation, according to the Inquiry, should include an acknowledgement of responsibility and apology from all Australian parliaments and other agencies which implemented policies of forcible removal as well as monetary compensation. All Australian state and territory parliaments have apologized specifically to those affected by the previous policies of forced removal from their families by authorities. Under the Howard Government the Commonwealth Parliament did not agree to a full apology but expressed "deep and sincere regret" for unspecified past injustices as part of a Motion of Reconciliation on 26 August 1999.

RUDD MAKES HISTORY - THE APOLOGY

13. (U) In his first major speech to Parliament as Prime Minister last year, Kevin Rudd issued his historic apology on behalf of the government to the stolen generation as part of an effort to repair the relationship with the country's indigenous population. In his speech Rudd said, "Our challenge for the future is to embrace a new partnership between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The core of this partnership for the future is closing the gap between

Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians on life expectancy, educational achievement and employment opportunities." The popular support nationwide for Rudd's measure was overwhelmingly positive. However, the Rudd government rejected any suggestions to compensate victims.

14. (SBU) February 13, 2009 marked the one year anniversary of the Rudd government's apology to the Stolen Generation. The apology has not necessitated new policies, legislation, or public administration procedures. Budget figures remain largely the same as previous recent years. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has defended the government's record on indigenous QKevin Rudd has defended the government's record on indigenous affairs in the year after the formal apology to the stolen generations, and has promised to work harder to end disadvantage. "The apology has also raised expectations," Rudd told Parliament. "Expectations that change would be swift, results sudden. But generations of indigenous disadvantage cannot be turned around overnight. Some say that little has happened in the year since the apology. But that is not the case. Progress has been made." The past year "laid the foundations", Rudd said, for the government to meet its ambitious plan to end the disadvantage experienced by many indigenous people.

OPPOSITION CRITICISM

15. (SBU) But while the Rudd government has been eager to show that the apology is being reinforced with action - Minister for Indigenous Affairs Jenny Macklin also announced the establishment of "a Foundation to provide practical and innovative healing services" for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders - dissenting voices are also being heard. The

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leader of the Opposition, Malcolm Turnbull, promised support for the Government's plan to end disadvantage, but said more indigenous leaders should be consulted throughout the process. "All the beauty and the majesty of the apology will be lost forever if it's not followed by action," Turnbull said. Opposition indigenous affairs spokesman Tony Abbott called for a ban on houses being built in remote indigenous communities where there are no jobs available arguing that building in economically unsustainable communities traps people in poverty. These houses were among the tangible actions hailed by Rudd who announced that since the apology 80 houses had been built in Northern Territory communities, five communities had signed township leases, and an extra 65 police had been assigned to indigenous areas.

REALITY: NUMBERS TALK - STATISTICS AND THE FEDERAL BUDGET

16. (SBU) In recent years the Commonwealth Government has been committing more resources than ever to the improvement of indigenous circumstances, and has attempted to reform mechanisms for social development and facilitate greater social inclusion. Nevertheless, the socioeconomic circumstance of many indigenous Australians has remains dire. Indigenous Australians, by nearly every socioeconomic statistical measure including a 17 year gap in life expectancy, are worse off than non-indigenous Australians. The Australian Medical Association 2008 annual report card on indigenous health found that indigenous children, compared to non-indigenous Australian counterparts, are more likely to be stillborn, to be born premature, to have low birth weight or die within the first months of life. They are two to three times more likely to die in the first year and are 11 times more likely to die of respiratory causes.

17. (SBU) Despite the current government's emphasis on closing the gap, the programs and level of funding supported in last year's budget are little different from those of the previous government. The budget also continued the previous government's focus on improving the situation in the Northern Territory - a focus some argue is inappropriate when the needs in Aboriginal Australia are so widespread. The degree to which the present budget's commitments might be judged as

appropriate to 'a new partnership' and 'closing the gap' may be judged in the context of the nationwide shortfall in the area of indigenous housing - estimated as \$3.5 billion, and in health as between \$350 and \$500 million per annum.

WHAT ARE INDIGENOUS LEADERS SAYING?

18. (SBU) Indigenous leaders have complained of government actions or inaction. Others have slated what they see as a lack of unity within the indigenous community. Larissa Behrendt, professor of law and indigenous studies at Sydney's University of Technology, said Aboriginal Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin "makes a mockery of any claim that she is interested in proof of what works and what doesn't in relation to effective Aboriginal policy making." Former Administrator of the Northern Territory, Ted Egan, warned "Aborigines are culturally, physically and spiritually doomed unless they can escape from a morass of "misguided policies imposed by well-intentioned but inept government agencies." Others criticize what they see as lack of unity among community leaders who are often riven with rivalries. Dr Sue Gordon, the chairwoman of the Commonwealth's intervention taskforce in the Northern Territory, said "Aboriginal people can't speak collectively, we are such a diverse group of people," she said. Warren Mundine accused fellow indigenous leaders Tom Calma and Mick Dodson of hijacking the debate on indigenous issues with a rights "agenda". "I'm very angry, because we had a summit recently and all their cronies did was talk about representative bodies, constitutional change and treaties," he said.

REASON FOR HOPE?

19. (SBU) There have been some bright spots. One direct result of the change in administration was the reversal in the government's stance on the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. On 3 April Minister for Indigenous Affairs Jenny Macklin announced the GOA would now support the Declaration after the Howard government voted against it in 2003. (reftel A) Macklin also flagged an overhaul of the Native Title Act to ensure mining royalties are used productively by traditional owners who receive them. The Australian government selected Indigenous leader Mick Dodson as 2009 Australian of the Year. Dodson has adopted a theme of "decent education for all Australians" as his platform, saying he is confident Australians can come together around this simple ambition for their children's education. Dodson pledged to gather as many examples of success he can - success involving indigenous and non-indigenous children, in

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private, public and community schools, examples of parent-focused initiatives, teacher training, bilingual education - "everything that seems to be working."

12.Comment: There are no shortages of suggested solutions in the debate. One school calls for more "mainstreaming" of indigenous peoples. Another supports more focus on the remote settlements and the delivery of services. There are calls for more government intervention, while others maintain that solutions to social problems must come from within the community. What is certain is that just over a year after the Prime Minister's apology the gap in social indices between Australia's diverse indigenous community and the general population remains wide.

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